

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-18

WASHINGTON POST
16 February 1984

The Censorship Directive

THE WHITE HOUSE says that it will suspend the attack on federal officials' civil liberties that it launched last year in a wildly misdirected attempt to stop leaks. White House staff people speak of backing off and negotiating with Congress. To the extent that this retreat indicates diminishing enthusiasm for a genuinely bad idea, it is welcome. But Mr. Reagan would do better to drop the whole enterprise.

In a directive last March, he proposed two notably unwise innovations. He called for much wider use of lie detectors in the investigations of leaked information. And he tried to establish a system of lifetime censorship of everyone who holds high security clearance, requiring them even after leaving office to clear before publication anything they might write touching on national security. That would include not only the memoirs of former secretaries of state, but the position papers of former vice presidents who might be running for the next higher office. It would mean that one party, ensconced in the White House, would be able to censor its predecessors' criticism on most of the interesting questions in foreign and defense policy. Is there really anyone at the White House who thinks that's desirable?

This whole venture originated last winter in a

burst of irritation over the kind of published comment that all presidents regard as subversive leaks, and that most other people consider to be the informed debate that is normal and necessary in a democracy. The administration's case for this drastic directive has been undercut from the beginning by its inability to come up with examples of real leaks sufficient to justify any great tightening of the rules. Last fall, Congress voted to suspend the censorship provision six months for reconsideration.

It would be excessively generous to assume that the administration's decision this week is owed to any new appreciation of the directive's implications for civil liberties. The White House clearly wants to avoid any further congressional action in this area, since it is now aware that majorities in both houses disapprove of its plan. More immediately, it wants to get the subject of security and leaks off the agenda of the Senate Judiciary Committee's hearings on the nomination of Edwin Meese as attorney general. But the committee should not be overly cooperative on that one. The Justice Department drafted that directive and, while it may be suspended, it has been neither revoked nor disavowed. Mr. Meese's position on the directive, and on the larger questions that lie behind it, are well worth ascertaining.

STAT